

Social Communication Deficits in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Toni Simmons, B.S.
Catherine Schroy Ph.D., CCC-A

Fontbonne University—Department of Communication Disorders and Deaf Education

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by difficulties with social communication, social interaction, restricted and repetitive patterns in behaviors, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Research reveals that males are 3 to 4 times more likely to receive a diagnosis of ASD than females. This disparity is due to females with ASD showing less repetitive behaviors compared to males, differing symptom presentations, and criteria made specifically with males in mind (Halladay, et al., 2015; Mandy, Pellicano, St Pourcain, Skuse, & Heron, 2018).



Social communication is just one area of weakness in individuals with ASD. Recent research suggests that females with ASD may be “camouflaging” their social communication deficits which complicates receiving a true ASD diagnosis (Parish-Morris, et al., 2017). Females with ASD would “camouflage” themselves by maintaining eye contact, push themselves to socialize, and imitate social behavior of others. For example, it is suggested that females with ASD are more likely to demonstrate reciprocal conversation and are more driven to initiate friendships (Milner, McIntosh, Colvert, & Happe, 2019). Just like typical developing females, females with ASD appear to want to fit in. The purpose of poster is to bring awareness to the limited research about females with ASD.



Abstract

Social communication deficits are characterized by difficulties in social interaction, social cognition and pragmatics. These skills include but are not limited to responding to others, using gestures and talking about emotions and feelings and often occur in children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Research reveals that males are 3 to 4 times more likely to receive a diagnosis of ASD than females. Diagnostic criteria for ASD are more often related to symptoms presented by males rather than females because of this imbalance. This can result in females with ASD being misdiagnosed or receiving a later diagnosis. This review of literature will provide current research in the areas of social communication in children with ASD including differences in behaviors of this population by gender and age. Recognizing these deficits in social communication abilities may result in treatment options with more specific goals that affect the day-to-day life of children affected.



References



Literature Review

Studies indicate that identifying ASD as early as possible is important to ensure a better prognosis (Halladay et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2018; Milner et al., 2019).

- Halladay et al. (2015) and Milner et al. (2019) agree that females mask their symptoms to blend in with typical individuals and their interests are misinterpreted as being ‘normal’ for females.
- There is no difference between genders during toddlerhood (Halladat et al., 2015; Lawson et. al., 2018).



The characteristics of ASD are widely accepted for males. Meanwhile, studies cannot always agree on female characteristics of ASD.

- Halladay et al. (2015) found that females with ASD and average IQ scores have higher functional social behaviors compared to males.
- Kothari et al. (2013) support the theory that girls adapt better than boys when it comes to emotion recognition—which means that girls are less likely to meet criteria for diagnosis of ASD.
- Mandy et al. (2018) found that females have high autism spectrum traits (AST) in adolescence while the opposite was found in males.
- Lundström et al. (2019) found that some girls with ASD may not be captured by screening instruments.
- Rynkiewicz et al. (2016) found that girls with ASD use gestures more than boys. It was also found that parents reported boys’ communication skills to be better as their stereotypical behaviors decreased as they aged than girls.

Conclusion

Research has shown inconsistencies in the characteristics of females with ASD. These inconsistencies may result in females not being identified as early as males. Because early identification of ASD is important for correct intervention to begin, this is a concern. Further research into identifying characteristics specific to females with ASD could help professionals identify this disorder earlier. This may also lead to a screening tool for females that would result in less incorrect results.